

## What You Should Know About Hepatitis B

### ***What is hepatitis B?***

Hepatitis B is the world's most common serious liver infection. It is a virus which attacks the liver and can cause cirrhosis, liver cancer, or liver failure.

### **Who can get hepatitis B?**

Anyone who had not already had hepatitis B illness or has not received the hepatitis B vaccine can get hepatitis B, but those at greatest risk are:

- Individuals who share needles or syringes with others to inject drugs
- Individuals who have multiple sex partners or a history of a sexually transmitted disease
- Health, dental, and emergency care personnel who have contact with blood
- Infants who are born to mothers who are infected with hepatitis B
- Household and sexual contacts of an infected person
- Staff and clients of hemodialysis units and institutions for the developmentally disabled
- Immigrants and adoptees from areas of the world where hepatitis B illness is frequent

### ***How is hepatitis B spread?***

It is spread by contact with an infected person's blood, semen, or other body fluid. You can get hepatitis B by having sex with someone who has the disease without a condom; by sharing drug needles, straws, crack pipes, razors, nail clippers or toothbrushes with an infected person; or having an unsterile tattoo or body piercing done. Healthcare workers can be exposed by needlestick injury also.

You **cannot** get hepatitis B by:

- Hugging or shaking hands with an infected person
- Sitting near an infected person or other casual contact
- Breathing the same air (it is NOT spread in the air)
- Food or water

### ***What are the symptoms of having hepatitis B?***

You might have the following symptoms:

- Tiredness
- Feeling sick to your stomach
- Fever
- Diarrhea

- Not wanting to eat

You could also have dark yellow urine and yellowish skin or eyes. But some people don't have any symptoms at all.

***How can I find out if I have it?***

There is a simple blood test which can tell you if you have been exposed. A liver biopsy may be performed if you are found to have the disease.

***If I have hepatitis B and I become pregnant, is my baby at risk?***

Yes. All pregnant women in the U.S. should be tested for hepatitis B during pregnancy. But if you did not have prenatal care, you should be tested at the time of delivery. If you know you have the virus, you should inform your doctor and hospital staff, so that they can better care for your baby. Almost **90%** of untreated babies whose mothers have hepatitis B develop the disease. Your baby will need to receive hepatitis B vaccine and hepatitis B immune globulin (HBIG) within 12 hours of birth to prevent getting the disease. Then, a second vaccine dose must be given at one month of age and a third at 24 weeks of age. It is safe to breastfeed your baby, however.

Other household members should also be tested and receive the vaccine if not already infected.

***Can hepatitis B positive (HBV+) people give the infection to their sexual partners and family members?***

Yes, as stated above, condoms must be used during every sexual encounter (anal or vaginal). You should also inform your partner of your HBV+ status. They should get the hepatitis B vaccine, as should all people who live in your household. You should make sure any cuts on your skin are covered with a bandage. Dispose of soiled items which may have your blood on them properly in plastic bags. Always wash your hands well after touching your blood or body fluids.

***Do most people remain infected after they are exposed to the virus?***

Most adults are able to fight off the infection and clear the virus from their blood. However, 5-10% of adults, 30-50% of children, and 90% of infants will NOT get rid of the virus and will develop chronic infection. An infected person is capable of transmitting hepatitis B to others as long as the hepatitis B virus is circulating in his/her blood. This is usually 2 months before and 2 months after the onset of their symptoms of hepatitis B illness. However, chronically infected persons, often termed "carriers of hepatitis B," are capable of transmitting hepatitis B for the rest of their lives.

If a person also has HIV, the hepatitis B infection is much more likely to become chronic.

***If I don't have hepatitis B, should I get the vaccine for it?***

Yes. The vaccine is given to all children in the U.S. now and is recommended for all high-risk adults. This includes persons who have sexually transmitted diseases, who are injection drug users, or who have had multiple sex partners. The vaccine is given in three doses over a period of around six months and is very effective when a person receives all three doses.

***Is the vaccine safe?***

Yes, there are relatively few side effects. The most common reaction is only soreness at the injection site. It is an inactivated vaccine, and thus cannot give you the disease or make you sick.

***Besides getting the vaccine, how else can I protect myself from hepatitis B?***

- Make sure you use condoms when having sex.
- Only get tattoos or body piercings from persons who use sterile tools.
- Don't use an infected person's razor, toothbrush, or anything that could have blood on it.
- Don't share drug needles with anyone!
- Wear gloves if you have to touch anyone's blood or body fluids.

***Is treatment available for hepatitis B?***

If you have chronic hepatitis B (infection over six months of time), your healthcare provider may recommend treatment with interferon or lamivudine. Interferon is generally given by injection for 4 months. Lamivudine is taken in pill form. If your liver damage is great, a liver transplant may be recommended. There is often a long waiting list, though, for transplants. So, it is best to take care of yourself and see a physician regularly if you are infected.

Most importantly, **don't drink, or if you do, cut back.** And don't eat raw seafood. You should also be vaccinated with the hepatitis A vaccine.

***Can I get the virus again after treatment?***

Currently, it appears that you cannot be reinfected with hepatitis B.

***Should an infected person be excluded from work or school?***

Individuals infected with hepatitis B should not be excluded from work or school. Infected persons should be counseled, however, regarding the precautions they should take to reduce the chance of exposing others to their blood or body fluids.

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